

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

Tammy Baldwin

1962–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM WISCONSIN

1999–



Image courtesy of the Member

TAMMY BALDWIN ACCOMPLISHED TWO “FIRSTS” when she was elected to the House from Wisconsin in 1998: She became the first woman to represent her state in Congress and the first nonincumbent openly gay candidate to run and win election to the federal legislature.¹

Tammy Baldwin was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on February 11, 1962. She was raised there by her mother and maternal grandparents. Baldwin graduated from Smith College in 1984 and earned a J.D. from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 1989. From 1986 to 1994 Baldwin served on the Dane County, Wisconsin, board of supervisors. She also served briefly on the Madison city council, filling a vacancy in 1986. In addition, Baldwin maintained a private law practice from 1989 to 1992. At about the same time she joined the Dane County supervisors, Baldwin “came out” about her sexual orientation. “The fundamental lesson of the civil rights movement is that coming out—whether as an individual, part of a same-sex couple, or as a straight ally—is crucial,” Baldwin once wrote.² In 1993, at 31 years old, she was elected to the Wisconsin legislature, where she served until 1999. During her first term, Baldwin chaired the committee on elections, constitutional law and corrections— becoming one of the first freshman lawmakers in Wisconsin history to head a standing committee.

In 1998, after Republican Congressman Scott Klug retired from the Wisconsin district that included the capital city of Madison, Baldwin won the seat in a close race against Republican Josephine Musser. In a well-financed campaign, she ran on a liberal platform that called for universal health care coverage, publicly financed childcare, and stronger environmental laws. Baldwin’s victory was a grass-roots success, mobilizing so many voters (Madison, the district’s biggest city, had a 62 percent turnout) that polls were forced to stay open until late in the night as city

officials photocopied extra ballots. Baldwin claimed 52 percent of the vote to become the first woman from Wisconsin to serve in Congress. In 2000, she was re-elected by a slimmer margin, defeating Republican John Sharpless, a professor from the University of Wisconsin, by fewer than 9,000 votes—51 percent. In 2002 and 2004, Baldwin was elected by comfortable margins of 66 and 63 percent of the vote, respectively.³

In the 109th Congress (2005–2007), Baldwin was named to the House Energy and Commerce Committee and its Subcommittee on Healthcare, seats she had pursued tenaciously since her first term. Her driving motivation in politics is to pass legislation that will guarantee health care for all in America. She is working with conservative as well as liberal thinkers to craft proposals to meet this goal.

Previously, Baldwin served on the House Budget and Judiciary Committees. She also joined the Progressive Caucus, a group of liberal Democrats. Baldwin has been an advocate for health care reform and the preservation of Social Security and Medicare. On the Judiciary Committee she played a key role in the successful passage of the extension of the Violence Against Women Act in 2000. She earned a reputation as a supporter of a liberal policy agenda who, nevertheless, was a pragmatist. “I can’t get legislation passed without Republicans,” she once noted.⁴ A strong supporter of civil rights legislation to promote social equality, Baldwin is one of the most ardent proponents of hate crime legislation, arguing that they “are different from other violent crimes because they seek to terrorize an entire community. This sort of domestic terrorism demands a strong federal response, because this country was founded on the premise that a person should be free to be who they are without fear of violence.”⁵

Baldwin also has looked out for the interests of her largely rural and agrarian district. In 1999, she and other Members of the Wisconsin delegation fought to reverse a Depression-Era milk pricing system that paid farmers more money for their milk the farther they were from Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Strong farming interests in New England blocked the initiative, which won national attention. That same year, Baldwin also lobbied for an extension of Chapter 12 of the bankruptcy code to protect economically distressed farmers in the Midwest. “The family farm is the backbone of our rural economy in Wisconsin and all over this nation,” Baldwin declared in a House Floor speech. “Without Chapter 12, if economic crisis hits a family farm, that family has no choice but to liquidate the land, equipment, crops and herd to pay off creditors, losing the farm, a supplier of food, and a way of life.”⁶

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, “Tammy Baldwin,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

Wisconsin Historical Society, Archives Division. *Papers*: 1981–1998, 1.4 cubic feet. Papers documenting Baldwin’s early political career through her tenure in the Wisconsin state assembly. *Oral History*: In *Gay Madison: a History*, 0.1 cubic foot and 13 tape recordings. Oral histories conducted by Brian J. Bigler.

NOTES

- 1 “Tammy Baldwin Biography,” <http://tammybaldwin.house.gov/page.asp?pageffiaboutTammy> (accessed 14 June 2002).
- 2 Tammy Baldwin, “Harvey Milk and Tammy Baldwin,” 15 August 2000, *The Advocate*: 32.
- 3 “Election Statistics,” <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 4 *Politics in America*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 1099.
- 5 *Congressional Record*, House, 106th Cong., 2nd sess. (7 June 2000): 3933.
- 6 *Congressional Record*, House, 106th Cong., 1st sess. (9 March 1999): 1033; see also *Politics in America*, 2002: 1100.